New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1954

Volume XV, Number 4 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of February 22, 1954

1954 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years
Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1953 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
*Can-Can	304
Charley's Aunt	179
Dead Pigeon	176
End as a Man	250
*Fifth Season (The)	380
In the Summer House	168
*John Murray Anderson's Almanac	191
*Kind Sir	225
*Kismet	198
Late Love	258
Madam, Will You Walk	201
*Me and Juliet	298
My 3 Angels	334
*Oh, Men! Oh, Women!	184
*Picnic	348
*Prescott Proposals (The)	187
*Remarkable Mr. Pennypacker (The)	165
*Sabrina Fair	217
Sing Till Tomorrow	172
*Solid Gold Cadillac (The)	222
*Tea and Sympathy	266
*Teahouse of the August Moon (The)	254
*Wonderful Town	344

•

1952 Vol.

*Dial M for Murder	215
*Seven Year Itch (The)	186

•

1951 Vol.

*King and I (The)	304

•

1949 Vol.

South Pacific	312

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of February 22, 1954*

1954 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres During 1954
Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
*Caine Mutiny Court Martial (The)	382
*Confidential Clerk (The)	370
*Coriolanus	385
*His and Hers	393
*Immoralist (The)	373
*Lullaby	377
*Mademoiselle Colombe	397
*Ondine	362
Starcross Story (The)	390
*Winner (The)	365

Theatre Openings
"Ondine"
"The Winner"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of February 22, 1954*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"Ondine"

New York Post

February 19, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Audrey Hepburn and Her Triumph

Maurice Valency's adaptation of Jean Giraudoux' "Ondine" is billed as a "romance," rather than a play, and a romantic fantasy it truly is, lyric, philosophical, imaginative, touching, sometimes humorous, occasionally a little difficult and always theatrically striking. And at the 46th St. Theater last night, where it had its first local presentation, it was given a rare beauty and a quality of authentic distinction, not only by a handsome production staged under the sympathetic direction of Alfred Lunt, but, even more, by the lovely and completely beguiling performance of the magic young Audrey Hepburn in the title role.

"Magic," it seems to me, is exactly the right word to apply to Miss Hepburn as the errant water nymph who falls in love with a mortal and brings beauty and tragedy in her wake. For the youthful actress, who is here making her second appearance on the American stage and had a triumph in the otherwise disappointing "Gigi" a few seasons ago, is by no means an experienced player, and she still has disturbing moments of inaudibility. Yet, more by the lyric and exquisite quality of her presence than by unusual technical facility, she manages to make her role at once immensely moving and eerily unworldly.

"Ondine" is one of those plays that is both the delight and the bane of theatergoers by moving on several levels. It is worth emphasizing, therefore, that it can be enjoyed sheerly as what it is called, a "romance." The tale of the water nymph and the knight, who fall fatally and irrevocably in love and are tragically separated because they belong to different worlds, captures an atmosphere of dramatic fantasy that is haunting and touching in its own right, and, even if it didn't possess its philosophical overtones, its wistful legendary story would make it a fine subject for expert theatrical craftsmanship.

Since, however, Giraudoux was also a philosophical dramatist, there is more to it than the romantic narrative. Because "Ondine" is far from a literal work of the theater, almost any sensitive playgoer can read his own allegory into it, but it appears that basically the eminent French playwright was brooding over the inevitable conflict between dream and reality, between man's quest for the ideal and his human need for living in a world of prosaic actuality. It seems to be saying that mankind's triumph is that it does occasionally grasp that ideal for a moment and its tragedy is that the triumph must be so fleeting.

Although there is a vein of humor in "Ondine," which is occasionally gay and charming and at moments perhaps a little arch, it is inevitably a deeply melancholy play at bottom because it does have a defeat to dramatize. But it is not a lugubrious tragedy, and the production wisely emphasizes the gusto and the lyricism of its philosophical fantasy. And in this it is greatly aided by Mr. Lunt's skillful staging and the colorful charm of the production, importantly assisted by the settings of Peter Larkin and the medieval costumes of Richard Whorf.

If the play, in the end, gives evidence of being more concerned with the dream of the nymph than with the reality of the knight, the quality is made all the more inevitable because Miss Hepburn is so splendid as Ondine, while Mel Ferrer, who is the knight, is so comparatively commonplace in the role. I wish it could have been played with more romantic style. There are excellent portrayals by Alan Hewitt as a chamberlain and a judge, by Marian Seldes as the girl who represents practicality, by John Alexander as a foster father, and Robert Middleton as the lord of the waters. But, first of all, comes Miss Hepburn.

"ONDINE"

Play by Jean Giraudoux, adapted by Maurice Valency; staged by Alfred Lunt; music by Virgil Thomson; settings by Peter Larkin; costumes by Richard Whorf; lighting by Jean Rosenthal; presented by the Playwrights' Company at the 46th Street Theatre, February 18, 1954. The cast:

Auguste.....John Alexander
Eugenie.....Edith King
Ritter Hans.....Mel Ferrer
Ondine.....Audrey Hepburn
The Ondines.....Dran Seltz, Tani Seltz, Sonia Torgeson
Old One.....Robert Middleton
Lord Chamberlain..Alan Hewitt
Superintendent of the Theatre...Lloyd Gough
Trainer of Seals.....James Lamphier
Bertha.....Marian Seldes
Bertram.....Peter Brandon
Violante.....Anne Meacham
Angelique.....Gaye Jordan
Venus.....Jan Sherwood
Matho.....Barry O'Hara
Salammbo.....Lily Paget
A Lord....William Le Massena
A Lady.....Stacy Graham
Illusionist (The Old One).....Robert Middleton
The King.....William Podmore
A Servant.....James Lanphier
1st Fisherman.....Lloyd Gough
2nd Fisherman (The Old One)...Robert Middleton
1st Judge.....Alan Hewitt
2nd Judge..William Le Massena
Executioner.....Robert Crawley
Kitchen Maid.....Stacy Graham

DAILY NEWS

February 19, 1954

Hepburn's 'Ondine' Sheer Magic

By JOHN CHAPMAN

After last evening at the 46th St. Theatre it is going to be difficult for me ever again to think of Audrey Hepburn as an actress, or even as a human being. She will be what she was last evening—Ondine, an unbelievably lovely creature from somewhere beyond this earth to which we mortals are bound by the force of gravity and the gravity of mind.

The play is "Ondine," an old German folk or fairy tale about the Rhine Maidens whom Wagner has praised so gloriously in music. In it Miss Hepburn is a water sprite who comes briefly ashore and falls in love with a gallant knight-errant. It is a hopeless love, for her knight is mortal and fallible and Ondine belongs to neither time nor place.

Simply Bewitching.

I have one or two unimportant reservations about this treatment of the legend, as adapted by Maurice Valency from the French play by the late Jean Giraudoux, but there are no possible reservations concerning Miss Hepburn and the beautiful production with which she has been surrounded by the Playwrights' Company. Not since I was 12 years old and was persuaded by Maude Adams that there really is a Tinker Bell have I become so bemused as to believe in the existence of creatures who do not come from here.

"Ondine" is an elaborate and once-in-a-while ponderous exposition of an ancient folk tale, with not a little modern wit and wisdom added in the telling. It is a glorious thing pictorially—a shimmering example of what artisans of the stage can do. But it is Miss Hepburn's inspired performance which makes it a thing of pure and beautiful magic.

She isn't real, this girl at the 46th St. Theatre. She has come out of the lake, out of the sea, out of the Rhine, to tarry a moment with mortals. She is 16, and always has been; her body is supple, slim and immeasurably graceful; always she moves quickly and softly, and her voice is a voice of infinite tones and colors. She is a sorceress.

Notable Production.

On the stage, this submarine elf is in good company and good surroundings. There are excellent performances by Marian Seldes, Robert Middleton, Alan Hewitt, William Podmore and at least a half-dozen others, and Mel Ferrer makes a fine, pictorial knight-errant who is doomed to die once he has kissed Ondine. The settings—a fisherman's cottage, a hall in a great palace and a castle courtyard in the time of the Middle Ages—are stunning works by a young stage artist named Peter Larkin, and the costumes by Richard Whorf are works of great imagination and beauty.

The production of "Ondine" has been staged by Alfred Lunt, and once again this director of the Met's "Cosi fan Tutte" demonstrates his instinct for creating beauty out of motion. Not the least of the fine elements in a most unusual theatrical venture is the score by Virgil Thomson.

I don't think the Giraudoux-Valency plot and implications are either important or weighty—but they do serve to cast one under the spell of Miss Audrey Hepburn.

The New York Times

February 19, 1954

Audrey Hepburn, Mel Ferrer Appear Under Direction of Alfred Lunt

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Giraudoux' "Ondine," which opened at the Forty-sixth Street last evening, turns out to be ideal from every point of view. Ideal literature, ideal acting, ideal theatre—it hardly matters how you approach it. For Giraudoux' bitter-sweet fable of innocence and worldliness has been tenderly brought to life in a beautiful performance under Alfred Lunt's direction. As Ondine, the water sprite who falls in love with a human, Audrey Hepburn gives a tremulously lovely performance, and Mel Ferrer, as the grinning human, is the perfect counterpart. We are lucky. There's a magical play in town.

There is just enough worldliness in "Ondine" to keep it from being mawkish or sentimental. For Giraudoux could not forget the harsh realities. When Ondine, the sprite playing truant from the water, falls in love with the dashing knight errant, there seems to be no reason why they should not be supremely happy. But pure innocence and the world cannot get along together. The world has invented a little code of deception and hypocrisy to keep life bearable for humans; and no human can endure the absolute love of which a sprite like Ondine is capable.

* * *

Not being a cynic, Giraudoux describes the destruction of this love ruefully. His heart is involved in it, too. He shares Ondine's sadness and despair. There is some ironic comedy in this modern fairy story, particularly in the second act when the water sprite commits a whole series of social blunders in the palace of the King. But the tone of the last act is the one you are likely to remember most, and the one that is doubtless closest to Giraudoux own spirit. It is one of infinite regret that purity is impossible.

That much concerns Giraudoux's contribution, in Maurice Valency's delicate adaptation, to a notable theatrical occasion. What the people of the theatre have contributed is all gold, too. "Ondine" is just the sort of work that suits Mr. Lunt's direction. It is imaginative, light of touch and a little sly. Once Mr. Lunt, with his wife, acted in another Giraudoux fable "Amphitryon 38." To the humor of that performance, he has now added richness and sympathy.

* * *

Visually the production is gorgeous. Peter Larkin has designed three unworldly settings which Jean Rosenthal has lighted well. The fabulous scene for the king's palace is extraordinarily well done. Richard Whorf, who also has a background in "Amphitryon 38," has designed some gorgeous costumes that also have a sense of humor. Miss Hepburn's stunning gowns are by Valentina, who is theatre, too.

Everyone knows that Miss Hepburn is an exquisite young lady, and no one has ever doubted her talent for acting. But the part of Ondine is a complicated one. It is compounded of intangibles—of moods and impressions, mischief and tragedy. Somehow Miss Hepburn is able to translate them into the language of the theatre without artfulness or precociousness. She gives a pulsing performance that is all grace and enchantment, disciplined by an instinct for the realities of the stage.

As the human being who loses his heart to a fair creature of another world, Mr. Ferrer also has an instinct for the truth that makes fancy bearable. His knight-errant, amiable, a little fatuous and a little stupid, is an ingratiating character that fulfills the meaning of Giraudoux's fable.

Unfortunately there is not time enough now to salute the other actors properly — Marian Seldes as a coquettish princess who, nevertheless, can love a man sincerely; Alan Hewitt as pompous Lord Chamberlain and also as a ghoulish judge; Robert Middleton as a fantastic illusionist; Lloyd Gough as a vain theatrical director, and a good many others. Under Mr. Lunt's direction they all play with daintiness and impishness.

Play and performance are like a tapestry woven out of music and ideas. It is a bright work of art with sad threads running through it. Ideal, in short. And all theatre, too.

Journal-American

February 19, 1954

Tender Fairy Tale Presented Beautifully

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT IS A WELL-KNOWN FACT that all theatrical reviewers have a private collection of adjectives which they shuffle around for various occasions, endeavoring not to use the same one twice in a single sentence. But then along comes something like "Ondine," the Jean Giraudoux-Maurice Valency fantasy which opened at the Forty-Sixth Street Theatre last night, and there is the serious threat that the old-line superlatives will be exhausted before the finish of the first act.

For this is quite the most enchanting evening I have spent out of this world since I can recall.

Mr. Valency has devised a fascinating and sympathetic interpretation of M. Giraudoux's original fairy tale; Audrey Hepburn is certainly the most captivating water sprite since the first introduction of hydrogen and oxygen, and Mel Ferrer is easily the most attractive knight ever to unbuckle a breastplate.

Great Occasion

Add to this some magnificently imaginative sets and effects by Peter Larkin, the stylized direction of Alfred Lunt, music by Virgil Thomson, the efforts of an immaculate supporting cast, and the grand total amounts to an occasion of true stature in the American theatre.

Here is all the indigo beauty of a Maxfield Parrish painting, the tinkle and lilt of a mountain stream, and the brilliance and tragedy of a never-never land where knights are proud, ladies are fair and kings and commoners are blessed with equal grace.

But in "Ondine" there is more, for it is the story of the conflict between the world we live in and the greater one of nature that surrounds us; the tragedy that besets a knight who falls in love with Ondine, the spirit of water, and comes to his senses too late to prevent his destruction.

It is the story of man's struggle to breach the elements, his acceptance that having done so is a hollow victory. He must always return to today.

There is an extraordinary elfish quality about Miss Hepburn, apart from simple great looks—the mannered movement of her arms and hands, her faunlike posturing — that establishes her almost at once in her own world.

And Mr. Ferrer plays to this with the bewilderment of a mortal caught in a quest beyond his comprehension. However irreconcilable, it is a tender and cloying romance.

As my stock of adjectives is now running low I should like to call particular attention to the contribution of several other members of the cast.

Meritorious performances were turned in by Marian Seldes, as the earthbound lady to whom the knight returns; by Robert Middleton, who played the stentorian old man of the sea; by Alan Hewitt in two parts; John Alexander and Edith King, as Ondine's adopted parents, William Podmore, William Le Massena, Peter Brandon and many others in the large cast.

Not forgetting a final salute to Richard Whorf for the costumes, and Miss Valentine for the flowing white number she hung on Miss Hepburn in the courtroom scene.

"Ondine" is simply sublime (end of adjectives.) Come on, mums, let's pack up and go down to the ocean for the week-end. Might meet a sprite.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
February 19, 1954

THEATER

'Ondine'

By WALTER F. KERR

WHEN a show comes into town with the advance excitement generated by "Ondine" and a luckless reviewer finds himself something less than enchanted by it, he is in the unhappy position of announcing that there is no Santa Claus. Alas—and I am disappointed, too—there is really no Ondine.

There is, of course, Audrey Hepburn, and for any reasonable man that ought to be enough. Miss Hepburn explodes through a door like a demonic elf, eyebrows and fingertips shooting gloriously heavenward. She slips across the stage without touching the floor. She turns on a man and is nestled in his lap before any one has seen the movement begin. The lightest animated cartoon seems lumbering alongside this airborne genie, and when Miss Hepburn is in repose she is lovelier still. She sits astride a rough wooden bench directly beneath some handsomely draped fish nets; the line of her body not only completes the composition, it makes the rest of the composition seem clumsy. A demure vision in a medieval gown, she shines like an illuminated manuscript. A shivering prisoner pinned to a rock, she is every man's dream of the nymph he once planned to meet. Miss Hepburn is the principal magic in "Ondine."

* * *

There are other sorts of magic in the Giraudoux play which Maurice Valency has adapted for the Playwrights' Company. They are, however, mostly of the dime-store variety. The stage erupts fairly frequently with smoke puffs, lightning flashes and tremulous banshee wails. Barred windows fly open, armor suddenly disappears from a well equipped knight, birds and dogs swirl swiftly by, sea-urchins rise from a crystal fountain. The physical sleight-of-hand has been beautifully managed.

But the real magic that a fairy-tale requires—the sort that warms the theater and engages audience and actors in a wonderful conspiracy—is somehow missing from "Ondine." We never do capitulate to the fabulous and legendary world in which a young knight-errant is moved to take an entrancing sea-nymph for his bride. We watch its gaudy colors and its restless movement with some interest; but the door to belief is never quite opened, and we never do go through. "Ondine" is a fantasy which keeps reminding you—from moment to moment, and all the time—that it is only fantasy. Its adornments are brilliant, but they are self-consciously worn.

* * *

Just why so promising a piece should keep its cool distance is difficult to say. One of M. Giraudoux' more playful conceits may provide part of the answer. In his story-book second act, the author trots out the court jesters to talk about the play that is going forward. Life itself is too slow for drama, some one remarks; why not speed things up a bit, skip over a few steps, and get on to the end of the tale? The notion is, at first sight, an attractive one. But it is quite possible that Giraudoux—or his American adaptor—has skipped too much. We do lose those moments in which the characters slowly discover their feelings for one another. We pick them up later, and let them talk. But the talk is long, and the feeling is sadly missed.

Alfred Lunt has staged the eye-filling charade with enormous grace. The initial images are always stunning: a chess-game gathering at the court, a strange trial on a rocky seaside, a midnight invasion of woodland sirens. Richard Whorf's costumes are endlessly and meaningfully, inventive. Peter Larkin's backgrounds — both court and forest rise to a bat-wing tracery of trees—are perfectly suited to a make-believe evening. And Virgil Thomson has composed some extremely attractive snatches of song for the conscienceless sirens to sing.

Mel Ferrer's knight errant—torn between the lady of the lake and the patrician bride who has been assigned to him—is vigorously played. In lesser roles, Alan Hewitt, Robert Middleton, Marian Seldes, Lloyd Gough and William Podmore are especially engaging.

To look at, "Ondine" is a jewel box. To listen to, it's rather a trial.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun
February 19, 1954

Magic of 'Ondine' Easy on the Eyes

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Its advance heralds would have had you believe that "Ondine," which the Playwrights Company is offering at the 46th St. Theater, was something for the ages. It is a most mystifying production.

A medieval myth about a water sprite who takes a fling at being human, the work has obviously been put together with affection and expense. Visually it is lovely. Verbally it is what Yul Brynner calls "a puzzlement." I must confess to spending more than half the evening wondering just what it was all getting at.

I wish it had been played in the original French. In a foreign language, you do not fight these things. In English, it made me feel stupid and unable to concentrate.

The lady of the title is a water sprite whose magic prowess makes life easier for the old couple who have adopted her. When a Knight Errant drops in, the girl claims him for her own, without regard for protocol.

Magic Holds Edge.

At the King's Palace, an illusionist puts on an entertainment which compresses time, space and people's ages, to show the difference between Ondine and Princess Berthe, whom the Knight was formerly to marry. Ondine is romantic, unsophisticated and frank to a fault. Berthe is sage, even crafty, but no match for the magic sprite.

In the last stanza of the play the Knight is about to marry Berthe, having been deceived and deserted by Ondine. The sprite is captured, and at her trial the evidence shows she was faithful to her beloved Knight. But she must forget the earth, and he must die.

The myth is presumably intended to depict the two sides of human nature, and more particularly the facets of woman as man requires her to be.

The fantastic nature of the play, the imaginative flights, the carelessness of time and narrative logic, are all most acceptable.

What is not so easy to take is the pedestrian and unpoetic language and the abject humorlessness of most of the play. There are occasional laughs, but they are so very rare.

Lovely to See.

Audrey Hepburn is lovely to behold as Ondine. Little darting looks and movements are quite goldfishlike, and she moves her lithe body with infinite grace. Her final reversion to submarine-hood is most exciting.

Mel Ferrer looks boyish and dauntless as the Knight, who prefers his horses and dogs to the women who quarrel over him.

Marian Seldes is exquisite as the Princess, and Edith King and John Alexander provide substantial parents for the girls. Robert Middleton is impressive as a sort of underwater Wotan. Alan Hewitt conducts one of the more amusing scenes in the play, then joins with William Le Massena for the best comedy of all, at Ondine's trial.

Costumes Rich.

The costumes of Richard Whorf make rich panoplies of color, particularly through the castle sequences, and the scenery of Peter Larkin is imaginative without overwhelming the actors.

In sum, "Ondine" is pretty and vaguely pleasing and not much more.

Daily Mirror

February 19, 1954

Giraudoux's 'Ondine' Is Fascinating Fantasy

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Ondine," which The Playwright's Company brought to the 46th Street Theatre last evening, is a charming fairy tale for grownups. Penned by the late Jean Giraudoux, titan of the modern French stage, it has been adapted into English with feeling and insight by Maurice Valency.

AN ONDINE is a water spirit that can become human through marriage to a mortal. Giraudoux's particular Ondine does just that. She weds a handsome knight, is presented at court in the Middle Ages, and finds its deceit and falsity more than she can cope with.

As for the knight, a man born for action, he finds himself destroyed by the love beyond his capacity to understand. He was smitten by Ondine in the first place because of her supernatural allure and is a bit disillusioned when she, to please him becomes overly domestic.

A tragic ending is inevitable. The knight must die in Ondine's arms, as she is called back to the domain of the Water King. There, she is doomed to forget the past, but her love gives her the power to retain some memories of her happy times on earth.

IN THIS FASCINATING fantasy, Giraudoux has some things to say about mortal existence. Life, he believes, is a bad play, poorly constructed, with the climaxes in the wrong places and with the cues mismanaged. He is concerned with reality and where it ceases to be.

Truth, he thinks, can be disastrous. We must make compromises, flatter and wheedle, to get ahead. He is a cynic with compassion, a realist but a dreamer. He has written a bittersweet romance, with imagination and grace. It is compelling, arresting, thoughtful theatre.

The Playwrights' Company has given "Ondine" a gorgeous production. The settings by Peter Larkin and the costumes by Richard Whorf are from a delightful storybook world. Virgil Thomson has written an atmospheric score. And Alfred Lunt has directed with ingratiating skill.

AUDREY HEPBURN is captivating as the shapely, seductive, ethereal and tempestuous sprite. Mel Ferrer is ever so right as the mundane knight who finds marriage to a creature of fancy baffling and frustrating. And there are excellent performances by John Alexander, Edith King, Robert Middleton,, Alan Hewitt, Lloyd Gough, Marian Seldes, Peter Brandon, William Podmore and William Le Massena.

For us, "Ondine" is a stimulating adventure in the theatre. It has glamor, beauty, illusion, mystery and sheer enchantment to recommend it. It suggests, rather than baldly states, ideas. You will only get as much from it as you bring to it. There are warming and touching moments, amusing and paradoxical moments.

We urge you to take a flight with Giraudoux into a magical sphere for an evening. It is an experience that you will not soon forget. But you had better buy your tickets immediately, for the advance sale is huge.

"The Winner"

DAILY NEWS

February 18, 1954

Elmer Rice's 'The Winner' Infirm

By JOHN CHAPMAN

For one of the quartet of scenes in his new comedy, "The Winner," Elmer Rice goes into a courtroom and into drama. Here he is at his best, as should be expected from the author of "On Trial" and "Counsellor at Law." When he is in the comedic vein he is, this time, on shakier ground; much of what he has written for the captivating Joan Tetzel and the affable Tom Helmore seems more literary than dramatic—better for reading than for speaking and listening. And a stage, of course—in this case, the one at the Playhouse, where "The Winner" opened last evening—is a place for speaking and listening, not reading.

Fights for Her Honor.

Rice's story is about a girl behind a cigar counter in a business building. Nice girl. Hard-working. Barely makes enough to support her mother in Cripple Creek, Colo., and herself in a sleazy furnished room in New York. She is engaged to a young lawyer (can't marry him because he can't afford a divorce yet). She accepts dates from customers at the cigar counter—perfectly proper dates for cocktails or dinner or a show. Won't let anybody up in her room and won't even wrestle in a taxicab.

But one of her admirers—an old fellow with a million who has become infatuated—does gain entrance one night when he gasps that he is ill. He is ill, all right, for soon he dies of a heart attack on her bed, and a nasty-minded photographer snaps a shot of the girl and the corpse in what looks like a compromising position.

Which brings us to the courtroom—not one of those jury things, but a judge's chambers up in Bridgeport. Before he died, the lovelorn old boy made a new will leaving everything to the girl and cutting off his wife. This will is being contested by the wife and defended by the girl—not so much that the girl wants the money as that she wants to save her good name. The judge decrees that she can keep both her honor and the money.

An Interesting Actress.

This is a good scene, with Helmore representing the widow and opposing Miss Tetzel, with Whitfield Connor as her fiance and therefore on her side, and with Frederick O'Neal as an unusually sensible judge. The scene is enormously enlivened by a shrewd and picturesque performance by Vilma Kurer as a biased witness.

Elsewhere, Rice is inclined to wander. Once in a while he gets off a good sound crack like, "You can have too much champagne but never enough," and he has other wise and pithy observations. But his story is a fairly aimless one, and its conclusion, though obvious, is not particularly satisfying.

Miss Tetzel is handsomer than ever—and a very good little actress. Helmore, an old hand at suavity, is an agreeable comedian, and Connor plays the thankless role of the fiance quite gallantly. The production is by the Playwrights' Company, the two sets are by Lester Polakov, and the author himself directed.

"THE WINNER"

Play written and staged by Elmer Rice; settings by Lester Polakov; presented by the Playwrights' Company at the Playhouse Theatre, February 17, 1954. The cast:

Eva Harold.....Joan Tetzel
Martin Carew....Tom Helmore
David Browning.....
Whitfield Connor
Newscaster.....P. Jay Sidney
Arnold Mahler...Lothar Rewalt
Irma Mahler....Jane Buchanan
Haggerty.....Philip Pruneau
Dr. Clinton Ward.....
Charles Cooper
Miss Dodd.....Lily Brentano
A Stenographer...David Balfour
Judge Samuel Addison.....
Frederick O'Neal
Hilde Granzbeck...Vilma Kurer

New York Post

February 18, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Troubles of a Girl and Her Money

In the third of its four scenes, Elmer Rice's new play, "The Winner," gets into a judge's chambers during a hearing, and, since Mr. Rice is a veteran and expert hand at the courtroom drama, which the American theater almost inevitably does well, the opening at the Playhouse last night suddenly came to agreeable life. For the rest of the time, however, the proceedings were considerably less enlivening, and it is my melancholy task to set down the opinion that one of the nation's distinguished playwrights continues in a slump.

In "The Winner," which is an ironic title, Mr. Rice is telling about a luckless cigaret girl who seems to have trouble with her men. She is in love with a young lawyer who can't, or won't, get a divorce from his wife, and she is the recipient of the unwelcome ardors of a rich old man who dies of a heart attack in her apartment. Despite the unpleasant publicity and the hatred of the deceased's venomous widow, things begin to look better for her when it develops that the ancient gentleman has left her his fortune and, after some ugliness in the law courts, the will is proclaimed valid.

The Implications

This is where the title comes in. Mr. Rice is not only a weaver of melodramas. He is also an author with a social conscience, and he is concerned with the moral implications of the case as well as with the plot manipulations. Has the girl the right to the fortune thus acquired? Would she be better off without it? Is she justified in buying off the nasty widow and the dead man's lovelorn secretary when they threaten to expose the fact that the old fellow had been cheating on his income tax and most of the money belongs to the government?

Here, I think, is where one of the grave troubles with the play emerges. Although the trial scene is the most interesting event of the evening, it is actually but the prologue to "The Winner," since the drama apparently is intended to deal with the effect on the heroine of her acquisition of the bequest, and it is not until the final scene that Mr. Rice gets around to dealing with the issue. And I fear he isn't very provocative when he does.

The Oasis

The play's failure to get around to the author's central theme for such a long time might be an entirely academic fault if the episodes leading up to it were consistently interesting. But I can't think that they are. Nor does it seem to me that the switch in the heroine's affections from her lawyer-fiance to the debonair and hard-drinking attorney for the wife helps a great deal. The unfortunate result is that "The Winner" offers but a small oasis in a large desert, with its one rewarding spot surrounded by vast spaces that are flat and arid.

Joan Tetzel, returning from her long success in London with "The Little Hut," is onstage virtually the entire evening as the heroine, and she plays with directness and moments of emotional effectiveness. Tom Helmore is properly debonair as the lawyer for the opposition, and Whitfield Connor is believable as the discarded fiance. As always, Frederick O'Neal gives dynamic interest to the role of a wise and tolerant Negro judge. Vilma Kurer has a good scene as the jealous secretary. But "The Winner" is a disappointment.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 18, 1954

Elmer Rice Drama Comes to Playhouse

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Winner" at the Playhouse is a problem play about moral values.

It deals with an unlikely but perfectly possible situation in which a young girl is bequeathed a fortune, then has to fight for her good name in the face of her good luck.

Like "The Prescott Proposals," "The Winner" starts out with a gentleman dying in the bedroom of a lady not his wife. In this case, the man is in love with the girl, who does not return his affection. She is inclined toward platonic dinners and evenings out with men she meets at her cigar counter. Her fiance is not only already married, unhappily, but financially strapped.

The dead man wanted the heroine to retire to Cuba with him, and as a lure had made a will leaving her all his money. His death precipitates a scandal, and his widow tries to buy her off.

The girl decides to fight, so she can "live with herself." The issue is whether she should accept the offer and forget the will, or go to court for the money and clear her name.

Puzzled Suffering.

It apparently does not occur to her that her name would be in better shape if she bowed out altogether, and refused the money. She writhes through a good deal of puzzled suffering, complicated by the fact that the widow is a mercenary cheat.

Much more important to her is the fact that a charming, impertinent and witty counsel for her opponent ends up succumbing to her allure.

Loquacious Play.

As it stands the play is mighty loquacious. I wish Elmer Rice had told it all in a courtroom. The scene in the judge's chambers is the most effective one in the play. And all the other revelations could have been made with more tension through testimony.

In plays where people quarrel with their souls, it is often the case that whatever actors have the funny lines end up with the honors. In "The Winner" it is Tom Helmore as the opposing lawyer, who is the most ingratiating character of the evening. It is a part tailor-made for his careless style, impertinent and slick. Mr. Helmore gives the evening its best sequences.

Sexy Office Manager.

In a brief role, as a sexy office manager for the dead man, Vilma Kurer adds a cheerful and canny picture of a vindictive dumpling.

As the principal lady in the case, Joan Tetzel has the role of a girl who takes herself very seriously. She seems always indignant over something, which is understandable under the shocks she receives. She is in turn effusive, tense or cute, but she has to go right back to being angry again before the character gets much dimension or appeal.

Whitfield Connor is earnest and morose as the fiance who glows at the thought of his future wife's money, and Frederick O'Neal is patient and warm as a judge, who carefully avoids being pompous or pontifical in a long, solemn speech.

Daily Mirror

February 18, 1954

Elmer Rice's 'The Winner' Opens at Playhouse

By ROBERT COLEMAN

After a too lengthy absence from Broadway, Elmer Rice returned last evening with a comedy of values called "The Winner." It was presented by The Playwrights' Company, of which Rice is a distinguished member, at The Playhouse. It is our duty to report that the new arrival is only half a winner.

WE HAVE NOTICED over the past few seasons that our dramatists have been apt to underwrite, to understate, to suggest characters and situations, and never quite develop a satisfying whole. Unfortunately, "The Winner" falls into the category of promising plays that don't come off satisfactorily.

And that's a pity, for few playwrights can handle situations, can pen amusing and trenchant dialogue, can put sheer electricity into theatre so well as Rice. Being a former lawyer, he is particularly adept at court-room scenes. And much of the new tenant at The Playhouse is concerned with the intricacies of the law.

"The Winner" has to do with a cigaret girl who vicariously inherits a fortune from an elderly suitor. But his disinherited widow contests the will, and the Government has a claim to more than the estate is worth in back taxes. So the girl, after proving herself innately decent, settles for the affection of a young attorney representing the other side but really in her corner.

THE AUTHOR, using an adroit cast, has staged his play skillfully. He has made it seem more important and entertaining than it really is. That's a tribute to Rice's craftsmanship as dramatist and director. He has so much to give the theatre that we can only regret that, in this instance, he hasn't given it enough.

Joan Tetzel, who has been occupied in London and Hollywood over recent semesters, returns to etch a credible and sympathetic portrait of the litigous cuties. Miss Tetzel, be it reported, is much more believable than her role. From which you may infer that she is a top-flight actress.

Tom Helmore is eminently right as the urbane counsel for the offense, who eventually overpowers the defense with his common sense and charm. Whitfield Connor is very good, indeed, as the attorney who is willing to compromise and, by so doing, loses the capitivating Miss Tetzel.

FREDERICK O'NEAL, one of our favorite actors, is wonderfully human as a sympathetic judge. He, in our opinion, has few peers in any part that he essays. We are happy that his assignment is an important one, and that he makes so much of it with dignity and assurance.

Vilma Kurer, an excellent actress, handles a showy character role with unerring effect. And appreciative mention must go to Lothar Rewalt, Jane Buchanan, Lily Brentano and Phillip Pruneau.

It is good to have Rice back with us again. He knows and loves the theatre. We are sorry that in his first time out in several years he is just feeling out the course, warming up his muscles for a stretch drive in the future. He hasn't got a "Winner" this time, but he's tuning up for one in the next start.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

February 18, 1954

THEATER

'The Winner'

By WALTER F. KERR

"THE WINNER" is a play about a girl who has integrity and a very poor selection of men friends. One of the gents chasing Eva Harold is a married man who wants to marry her. Another is a married man who wants to run off with her. A third is a lively fellow who drinks a bit too much, and who's picked her up on a casual evening out.

Between them, these swains make for trouble. As Elmer Rice has worked out his new piece at the Playhouse, Suitor Number Two drops dead in Eva's apartment, leaving her a large legacy. Suitor Number One becomes her counsel when the legacy is contested and hauled into court. Suitor Number Three turns up as counsel for the opposition.

"I find this just a little mystifying," remarks a solemn judge as he surveys the unlikely reunion before him. But even now coincidence has not had all its innings. The judge himself, it gradually develops, has known the dead man well. What follows is one of the chummiest courtroom contests in recorded history.

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Much more mystifying than the plotting of Mr. Rice's new play, though, is its tone. The program doesn't say whether the author has intended it as a comedy or a melodrama. The play doesn't really say, either.

A man gasps, and dies; but even as he is dying Mr. Rice has him sputtering protests against the income tax which can only be interpreted as a cue for laughter. Eva Harold is really upset over what has happened to her admirer; but she is never so upset that she doesn't remember to slash a little slipstick across her face (light laughter) before tremulously facing her inquisitors.

We become very much embroiled in the moral problem of whether or not Eva ought to reveal the secret will which disinherits the dead man's wife; but Eva has concealed the will in a series of extremely girlish hiding-places which are good for a half dozen sight gags. (Funny ones, too). The climactic trial is a sober affair, full of high-sounding references to "base passion and ignoble motives," and including a Biblical homily from an utterly earnest judge; but its showpiece is a gabby monologue from a redheaded secretary right out of French farce.

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Throughout the evening we are busy readjusting ourselves to Mr. Rice's latest attitude toward his characters and his theme. Sometimes the virtuous Eva—who would rather keep her reputation spotless than pick up that handy fortune—seems a sort of latter-day Joan of Arc. And sometimes she is as giddy as the birdbrained lass who dawdled her way through "Dream Girl."

The part would no doubt present any actress with insuperable problems. Joan Tetzel's method of dealing with them is one of simple assault. Miss Tetzel is an attractive girl, with a great deal of presence. She has, however, gritted her teeth so firmly, tightened her fists so furiously, and battered at the role with such fierce determination that she must take some of the blame for its rather dismaying impact. The performance is an inventive one, but it is also severely mannered; you do not wind up rooting for Eva very much.

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If you do root for any one in a somewhat ambiguous play, it is for Tom Helmore as the suitor who is aligned—at least temporarily—with the enemy. Since Mr. Helmore is asked to display a jaunty skepticism about everything going on around him, he is in a better position than his fellow players to begin with. Mr. Helmore adds a strong and bracing dash of his own, though—he is urbane, light of touch, and unfailingly amusing. Frederick O'Neal brings his customary quiet authority to the part of a puzzled but well-meaning judge, and in less colorful roles Whitfield Connor, Lothar Rewalt and Jane Buchanan do as well as might have been hoped.

Scenic realism with us again; to indicate the presumably amiable poverty in which Eva Harold lives, designer Lester Polakov has turned out an apartment drab enough to accommodate the entire repertoire of Gian-Carlo Menotti.